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Recommended Citation

Diller, Lisa Clark, "Gilbert Burnet's Contested History" (2014). *Faculty Works*. 9.
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Gilbert Burnet's Contested *History*

For historians of the late seventeenth century, Gilbert Burnet's *History of My Own Time* remains a crucial source. However, his *History of the Reformation of the Church of England*, while less frequently cited, was by far more important within his own lifetime. The first two volumes were written during the heady and passionate days of the Popish Plot, and set the ambitious cleric on his path of balancing critiques of power with courting it. Burnet, as one of the Williamite bishops of the Glorious Revolution, helped form an alternative Anglican identity, one which he defended with yet a third volume in 1713 when he thought the Revolution Settlement was threatened. His *History* was crucial for shaping what this new form of Protestant identity might look like. I argue that in the first two volumes he laid out the specific characteristics of the church he wanted, especially making clear its relationship to the crown and a decidedly un-sixteenth century view of the characteristics of Reform. While it was immediately controversial, there may have been even more push-back had its readers known Burnet would soon be in a position to enforce his vision.

So, what kind of Anglicanism did Burnet want? He wanted a strong state church, with few dissenters. His early work in Scotland had consisted heavily of trying to reconcile Dissenters and the Anglicans.¹ This had won him no friends, but he remained committed to a big church that stretched its theology as widely as possible. Ultimately, he eschewed persecution, but he had little patience for those who he saw as sticking at small points of doctrine. He praised the process by which reformation had come to England, arguing that religious errors were best sorted out by a national church and (in case people thought Henry VIII insufficiently religious admirable) that God could even use bad kings to accomplish his will in doing this.²

He first made his case for a monarchically-driven church by starting with Charlemagne and moving through successive rulers to point critically at each time they lost power over their local churches. He lamented how the "The popes. . . required the bishops to separate themselves from a dependence on their princes as much as it was possible."³ He then went on to describe the muddled legacy of Henry VIII by asserting "that princes have an authority in things sacred."⁴ Even if only a minority of the clergy wanted a reformation, he argued, they should still be allowed to petition the prince to do this. The kings could then give "the sanction of a law to the sounder, though the lesser part of a church."⁵ A church dependent on a strong Protestant monarch was the best kind of Reformation for Burnet.

¹ "Gilbert Burnet, *Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford, 2004).

² Gilbert Burnet, *The History of the Reformation of the Church of England*, 3 vols. in 6 (Oxford, 1829 [orig. 1679–1715]), 1:xv–xvii.

³ Burnet, *History of the Reformation* 2:208

⁴ Burnet, *History of the Reformation*, 2:ix

⁵ Burnet, *History of the Reformation*, 1:vii, 5292:x

Perhaps his attempts to reconciling Dissenters and Anglicans in Scotland and ending by being attacked on all sides had left him a bit bitter at those who just wouldn't compromise on issues he deemed *adiaphora*. In any case, his analysis is pockmarked with asides about the extent to which people should be willing to give up closely held ideas if it interfered with the unity God required of his church. Tony Claydon has already pointed out how European Burnet's vision of Protestantism was, and Burnet consistently stopped in his narrative to give the continental perspective.⁶ But it isn't just the history of events in Europe, but theologians and church leaders themselves that Burnet cited, mostly in support of his ideal of a church that agreed on certain Protestant principles, and didn't let other divisions get in the way of fellowship. He especially quoted Bucer, both before and after he came to England, highlighting Bucer's "most tender care of preserving unity among the foreign churches."⁷ Peter Martyr fills the same role for him, allowing Burnet to call for England to avoid the conflicts over ecclesiology and the ceremony of the sacraments that had divided people in Switzerland and Germany.⁸

In fact, Burnet justified Henry VIII for some of his persecutions of religious dissent by arguing that "It seemed necessary to execute laws severely in some particular circumstance."⁹ And when describing the formation of the Elizabethan church, he put obstinate Dissenters in much the same camp as Catholics. "But if it is an high and unaccountable folly for any to forsake our communion and go over to those of Rome, it is at the same time and inexcusable weakness in others, who seem full of zeal against popery, and yet upon some inconsiderable objections do depart from the unity of this body and form separated assemblies and communions, though they cannot object any thing material either to our doctrine or worship."¹⁰ He used other Protestant leaders such as John Frith to make a case "that there should be no contest made [about such vital Protestant doctrines as the presence of Christ in the eucharist!!] ...for whatever opinion men held in speculation, if it went not to practical error... therefore [Frith] was much against all heats between the Lutherans and Zwinglians; for he thought in such a matter that was wholly speculative, every man might hold his own opinion without making a breach in the unity of the church about it."¹¹ There is not sense in Burnet's view that what he thought of as "speculative," others might be completely certain about and fully committed to.

While he is today often better known for his arguments in favor of toleration,¹² and his *History* is full of criticisms of Catholics who persecute, Burnet's toleration certainly doesn't represent the sort of sanitized and secularized liberal toleration of the world of most scholars who study him. Martin Greig's work on

⁶ Tony Claydon, "Latitudinarianism and Apocalyptic History in the Worldview of Gilbert Burnet, 1643-1715" *The Historical Journal*, Vol. 51, No. 3 (Sep., 2008), 577-597

⁷ Burnet, *History of the Reformation*, 1:187-190

⁸ Burnet, *History of the Reformation*, 2:214-217.

⁹ Burnet, *History of the Reformation* 1, 703.

¹⁰ Burnet, *History of the Reformation*, 2:xxx.

¹¹ Burnet, *History of the Reformation* 1: 342. Later (p. 511), Burnet argues that the reformation never would have happened if the pope had just allowed for communion in both kinds, clerical marriage and worship in a known tongue. He doesn't seem to be upset that there might not have been a reformation if these things had happened. The deep theological differences are not the big worry—mostly these are the kinds of things that allowed people to practice a reformed life.

¹² Gilbert Burnet, *History of My Own Time* (London, 1724), 30, 31.

Burnet's early life is instructive in its observations that Burnet was not unproblematically tolerationist. Burnet's primary goal was promoting Christian unity. That was an old-fashioned idea and not a "progressive" or secularizing toleration, Greig argues.¹³ So after the Glorious Revolution, Burnet advocacy for the authority of the monarch and the state over the church comes as no surprise. Burnet's ideal church which was wide, but which had great powers of authority in promoting morality.¹⁴ This emphasis on correct behavior and church discipline would surprise no readers of his earliest volumes.

Because Burnet's history of the Reformation emphasizes a specific kind of Reformation. The big concern was that even though the Reformation under Henry "had cast out the darkness by setting forth the scriptures to his people which had produced very good effects; yet as hypocrisy and superstition were purged away, so a spirit of presumption, dissention, and carnal liberty was breaking in."¹⁵ Christianity, Burnet reminded his leaders, was primary of "perfecting the nature of man.. securing the peace of every man's conscience, and of the societies of mankind in common... Every part of religion is then to be judged by its relation to the main ends of it." ¹⁶ He insisted that "The design of the Reformation was to restore Christianity to what it was at first" and that he desired to continue this work, which he described as "the reforming of our manners and our lives."¹⁷

Clearly being Reformed, for Burnet, wasn't only (or even primarily at times) about sets of specific beliefs or doctrines. Faith through the authority of scripture was the emphasis of the reformers, Burnet argued. "Their design was to make holiness and all other graces, necessary requisites in the composition of faith; though they would not make them formally parts of it." Burnet claimed that only people who "found in[themselves] those necessary qualifications which are delivered in the gospel" could be sure they were saved.¹⁸ This was decidedly part of his anti-Calvinist theological commitment, but demonstrates how much he thought that Reformation included a reformation of manners or behavior. And penance and moral behavior were a big part of this.

Burnet thought that in terms of church patrolling of behavior, too much had been given up in the Reformation. He complained in his second volume that "the clergy have now no interest in the consciences of the people, nor any inspection into their manners, but they are without yoke or restraint. All the ancient canons for the public penance of scandalous offenders are laid aside, and our clergy are so little admitted to know or direct the lives and manners of their flocks, that many will scarce bear a reproof patiently from them. In fact, "excommunication is now

¹³ Martin Greig, "Gilbert Burnet and the Problem of Nonconformity in Restoration Scotland and England," *Canadian Journal of History* (April 1997) 1-3.

¹⁴ Martin Greig, "The Early Career and Polemic of Gilbert Burnet." MA Thesis Queens University (1986), 3.

¹⁵ Ibid, 2:586.

¹⁶ Burnet, *History of the Reformation* 2:xviii, xxix

¹⁷ Burnet, *History of the Reformation*, 1:ii, iii.

¹⁸ Burnet, *History of the Reformation*, 1:573. He also thought there should be a "decent splendor in the worship of God," which seems quite Laudian (p. 574). Burnet argued that "Therefore all preachers were warned so to moderate themselves in this high point, that they neither should so preach the grace of God as to take away free will; not so extol free-will as injury might be done to the grace of God" (p. 584). "Next good works were explained, which were said to be absolutely necessary to salvation. But these were not only outward corporal works, but inward spiritual works" (p. 586).

become a kind of secular sentence.”¹⁹ Further, “Our reformation is not yet arrived at that full perfection that is to be desired. The want of public penance and penitentiary canons is indeed a very great defect.”²⁰

The problem after the Reformation, he lamented in his introduction, was that “the pastoral charge is now looked on by too many rather as a device only for instructing people to which they may submit as much as they think fit than as a care of souls, as indeed it is.”²¹ He wanted the clergy to have power over excommunication and penance. “It cannot be denied, that vice and immorality, together with much impiety, have overrun the nation; and though the charge of this is commonly cast on the clergy, who certainly have been in too man places wanting to their duty; yet on the other hand they have so little power, or none at all by law, to censure even the most public sins.”²² Poor Burnet really wanted penitentials and the possibility of discipline in the church and argued that “this matter has yet wanted its chief force; for penitentiary canons have not been set up, and the government of the church is not yet brought into the hands of churchmen. So that in this point the reformation of the church wants some part of its finishing in the government and discipline of it.”²³

After the Glorious Revolution Burnet participated and led out in the Reformation of Manners movement which called on the shared ideas of Christian behavior and morality that united many Anglicans and Dissenters. The Reformation of Manners movement was a lay attempt, in the 1690s, to combat the perceived evil that had accompanied the Act of Toleration as well as the apparent rise of Deism and atheism. The Societies for the Reformation of Manners attempted both to raise the issue of immorality as well as to seek enforcement of the laws against irreligious and lewd behavior. The members sought prosecution for their neighbors who were Sabbath-breakers, broke sexual mores, or who swore or were drunk in public. They were a small group, but made themselves felt all over England and Scotland, and especially in London.²⁴

Burnet’s work had clearly promoted this view of the godly and reformed life from the earliest part of his career. This was where he saw the logic of the Reformation leading and to which his *History* consistently pointed. He had been known to critique those around him for their immoral behavior—including King Charles himself, who he thought was promoting a bad atmosphere in society. During the very time he was writing his *History*, he very famously guided the notoriously roguish and skeptical Earl of Rochester to a righteous death in 1680, and then went on to make the most of holding Rochester’s situation up as an example of why intelligent, pious Christianity was the best witness.²⁵

¹⁹ Burnet, *History of the Reformation* 2:xiv.

²⁰ Burnet, *History of the Reformation* 2:xvii.

²¹ Burnet, *History of the Reformation* 2:xix.

²² Burnet, *History of the Reformation*, 2:416.

²³ Burnet, *History of the Reformation* 2:814.

²⁴ Daniel Williams, *A Sermon to the Societies, etc.* (London, 1698), 32-33. Edmund Calamy also promoted informing and castigated those who thought it was interfering, *A Sermon before the Societies*, 11-13; George Every, *High Church Party*, (London: Society for the Propagation of Christian Knowledge, 1956), 149.

²⁵ John Spurr, *The Restoration Church of England* (New Haven, CT: Yale, 1991), 228.

Burnet was personally tied to many Presbyterians, including Richard Baxter, who was deeply connected to the Reformation of Manners movement.²⁶ It was his suggestion to circulate a letter amongst the higher clergy, signed by William and Mary, urging the bishops and priests to greater pastoral care.²⁷ The raising of the standard of church discipline and attention to the practices of the laity was a response to the Reformation of Manners movement, which had been lay-driven. But Burnet (and Archbishop Tenison) wanted to make sure the Church of England was not slack in its own promotion of such virtues. In fact, Burnet connected this concern with the work Catholics had done in England under James II when “many were like to prove themselves better Protestants than was looked for [but] they were not become much better Christians and few were turning to a stricter course of life.” He then went on to say that the Catholic priests were much better at pastoral care and the Church of England clergy would do well to take instruction from the work ethic of the Roman Catholics.²⁸

So this was where the Reformation was incomplete, in Burnet’s view. Not only was it incomplete, but it might actually be lost if a powerful monarch did not support the church in extending its authority over the behaviors of those who considered themselves Protestants. In fact, the real spirit of the anti—Christ, the real anti-Reformation was an atheism or irreligion that didn’t take cognizance of godliness. A big tent church with rigorous discipline and a monarch who promoted piety were vital to the continuation of the Reformation.

Burnet’s scholarship was immediately recognized as the polemical thrust that it was, and controversy surrounding it only grew as he gained authority after his installation as part of the Williamite religious settlement. Historians such as the non-Juror and high churchman Jeremy Collier wrote their own versions of English church history in direct opposition to Burnet, emphasizing a stronger, more independent church.²⁹

But ten years before his insertion into position as the Bishop of Salisbury as a part of William and Mary’s takeover of the English church, Burnet had already laid out his goal for continuing the sixteenth century Reformation. For him, the Glorious Revolution allowed God’s work to continue in the heroic tradition of the Reformers. But his view of that Reform, clearly emphasized throughout the narrative, is one that highlighted practice more than ideas, godly behavior more than apocalyptic battle with the anti-Christ. His goal represented a pleading for even more growth in godliness: “The Gospel has not had those effects among us which it might have been expected...what will it avail us to understand the right methods of worshipping God, if we are without true devotion, and coldly perform public offices without sense and affection.”³⁰

²⁶ Steven Pincus, *1688: The World’s First Modern Revolution*. (New Haven, CT: Yale, 2009), 429.

²⁷ Craig Rose, *England in the 1690s*, 187.

²⁸ Gilbert Burnet, *History of the Reign of King James II* (Oxford, 1852), 143, 144.

²⁹ Andrew Starkie, “Contested Histories of the English Church: Gilbert Burnet and Jeremy Collier” *Huntington Library Quarterly*, Vol. 68, No. 1-2 (March 2005), 339.

³⁰ Burnet, *History of the Reformation* 2:xxi.